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**DISCOURSES OF WOMEN'S SUBALTERNITY AND
RESISTANCE IN THE POETRY OF SHAH LATIF**

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Abstract

The present study seeks to investigate the concept of women's subalternity and resistance depicted in the poetry of Shah Latif, a famous Sindhi mystic poet of the 18th century. This study is grounded in the Subaltern Studies perspective in which the powerlessness of the poor and oppressed people is highlighted in different historical and literary writings. The present study has analysed Sur Samundhi, Sur Kamod and Sur Marvi of Shah Latif and has found the elements of powerlessness and resistance of the subaltern women in front of the dominant male of their own community and that of the elite community using "weapons of the weak" in their everyday resistance against the powerful.

Keywords: *Subalternity, Resistance, Shah Latif, Women.*

Introduction

Women have historically faced subordination to different exploitative structures across the world. Rural South Asian including Sindh is no exception to this women Subalternity (Zaib, 2017). Several scholars have discussed their marginalisation and discrimination based on gender evolving from Marxist and feminist perspectives (Rais, et. al, 2015). The mainstream narratives have almost silenced the women agency in its popular portrayal of the subaltern women across the world. Scholars associated with the subaltern studies movement have tried to claim some voice for the voiceless women. But in rural Sindh, the subaltern women were portrayed as a symbol resistance in local folk stories and the mystical poetry of Shah Latif (Ayaz 2016: Sayed 1988).

Shah Latif, one of the great Sufi masters of Sindh, assumed to have lived from 1689-1751 A.D., was born in Hala Haveli near

Hyderabad, Sindh. He belonged to a Sayyid family and received his earlier religious education from his father, Habib Shah (Sorley 1966: 172). Shah Latif's soul was filled with the quest for truth and he wandered through different parts of India with ascetics (yogis). He was married to a woman from the elite classes of Sindh with whom he had a love affair (Sorley 1966: 172-73). His was a time in which the Sindhi society was divided along the class lines into the elites and the commoners (dalits) (Sorley 1966: 109-176). Shah Latif has left a huge collection of poetry termed as "*Risalo of Shah*" with a vast range of poetic topics ranging from mysticism to the folk stories. Women representation in the poetry of Shah Latif has been unique in its nature where these poor subalterns have been portrayed as symbol of resistance against the brutality of social texture and structures (Sorley 1966: 225-28; Ayaz 2016).

The present study tends to explore the account of women resistance in the poetry of Shah Latif from a subaltern studies perspective. Subaltern Studies, an initiative of the scholars from the third world, is founding its epistemological basis on the critique of dominant western Colonial and Marxist approaches to knowledge production in which the subalterns have been forcefully silenced (Biwas, 2009).

Subaltern studies as an approach emerged in 1980s in response to the dominant western approaches related to history writing where the common folks were silence to the level of non-existence and has become multidisciplinary to include a vast array of disciplines. Ludden (2002: 1) stated that "...Subaltern Studies became a hot topic in academic circles on several continents; a weapon, magnet, target, lightning rod, hitching post, icon, gold mine, and fortress for scholars ranging across disciplines from history to political science, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, and cultural studies."

From Pakistan, a very few scholars have applied this approach to the study of the subalterns. These include including Azad (2014), Zaib (2015; 2016) and Mashori and Zaib (2015). But these scholars have mainly discussed modern day Subalternity and have exceptionally discussed the resistance the subalterns have launched. These elements of fictional subalterns can be found in *Sur Marui*, *Sur Sassui* and other different segments of the *Risalo* of Shah Latif. This paper tries to explore the portrait of the subaltern women in the poetry of Shah Latif and the form of resistance their bodies embody.

Literature Review and Operationalization of the Concepts:

Subalterns are silent members of society whose voices and existence have been subordinated to the whims of patriarchy, capital and power relations. They bear emotional suppression, psychological constraint, voicelessness in cultural representations, degradation in their social position and powerlessness in the political process and belong to the marginalised class of people worldwide (Varghese, 2009). They are the *others* having zero value in society and are thus liable to face the brutality of time, space and social relations (Spivak, 1988).

The term “subalterns” was first used by Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, to categorize the economically inferior people/labours working in different European capitalist economies under the autocratic regimes (Zaib, 2015). This approach inspired many English and South Asian historians who were committed to re-write history (of the people) from below in order to give voice to their political choices not formally recognised (Ludden, 2002). The dominant historiography was written in the Nationalist, Marxist and/or Cambridge school manner to which the South Asian Subaltern Studies group was critical because a vast majority of the resistant voices remained unheard in these approaches (Biswas, 2009, p. 200). The main critique was that the Nationalist historians have glorified the nationalist leaders at the cost of the common masses, the Cambridge school of historiography wrote from the imperialist point of view while the Marxist historiography was introducing modern concept like class and nation in the postcolonial milieu. In all these approaches, the voices of the downtrodden masses were either missing or forcefully reduced to class categorisation (Chowdhury 2010). So, it was necessary to write about the people who were missing from the histories of any nation in plural societies.

In the last decade of the 20th century, however, “the idea of subaltern became a weapon, a tool, and a method to recover the voices from margins” (Ludden 2002). It acquired worldwide significance in cultural, feminist and postcolonial studies and became widely associated with different disciplines ranging from history to politics to anthropology to literature (Dharmaraj, 2014).

Subaltern literature suggests that to give “voice to the voiceless” and to represent them in the history of nations has been declared as the basic objective of subaltern studies. Keeping this in view, the current study tries to figure out the voices of the marginalised

women in the poetry of Shah Latif in the rural setting of the 18th century Sindh. This study will follow the theoretical approaches of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, the Indian subaltern studies' specialists. Their theoretical concepts are summarised below.

Operationalisation of the Concepts:

Subalternity is defined as the opposite of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) the opposite of domination (Guha 1982). It is also assumed to be standing in opposition to power politics (Spivak, 1988). The two concepts of "hegemony and power politics" represent a dualistic image or binary dyad of unequal distribution of power between the dominant and subordinate groups at the level of political economy and socio-cultural level. The writings of Guha and Spivak can help us to further clarify the concept of subalternity.

For Guha (1982), subalternity is the construct of demographic difference. Culture, class, age and caste are the main factors according to Guha in demographic differences that cause subalternity among the people. Although the class based subalternity can also be found in Gramsci's theory of Italian labours in comparison to the authorities, but for Guha, the Indian peasantry is subaltern as no Marxist or whatever school of historiography has discussed them and put a voice into their mouths. Though, class based subalternity can be found in many societies around the world but caste based subalternity can only be found in South Asian context (Roy Chowdhury, 2016). As in Indian society, the casteism has divided the society into Brahmins and Dalits in which the later, by its caste position, is in the permanent condition of subalternity (Dharmaraj, 2014), so is the case in Sindh where there are elements of castes of *Ashrafia* and the *Dalits* in which the former have the hegemony in every walk of life while the later are subordinated and subalterns (Hussain 2019: 1-3). Guha's concepts of caste and class are supposedly helpful in understanding the of the women subalternity in the 18th century Sindh as portrayed in the poetry of Shah Latif.

Spivak (1988) in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" took further Guha's concept of subalternity and thematically specified gendered subalternity. Setting her discourse in the postcolonial society, she claims that women are the facing the most gruesome marginalisation among all the subalterns. Discussing the practice of sati, to which the British looked from criminal perspective while the Nationalists from religious/cultural point of view, Spivak (1988) claims that the voice and the will of the women has never

been asked for by either the English men or the Indian men. From this she concluded that the Indian women cannot speak and they are represented by others in politics and history.

But in Shah Latif's poetry, one can see a glimpse of the women being given voice by the poet (Ayaz 2016). In Latif's poetry, folk characters of women are shown as helpless (*Sur Samundhi*), or showing resilience to the dominant groups like in the case of *Noori-Jam Tamachi* (in *Sur Kamod*) and *Umar-Marui* (in *Sur Marui*). It is in this case, that the weak have either remained unheard or they have resisted their subaltern position and have won over the powerful by either compelling them to cross the caste boundaries or by getting escaped from them with their lovers.

Women's Subalternity in Sur Samundhi

In this Sur, Shah Latif throws light on the helpless annals of the women when their husbands and beloved ones are left on sea voyages for trade or fishing. In South Asian societies, women remain silent under the heavy discourse of patriarchy and are represented by the male members of their families. In this Sur, the female agency is a protagonist who is being haunted by separation from her beloved ones because they later set on sea voyages to earn a livelihood. In this regard, Shah Latif has given them a voice and represented their helplessness in his poetry.

*"Lady, at moorings do reside,
and keep the fire in your heart.
Burn on, that mariners abide
with you, not leave you suddenly."*

*"At moorings settle down, nor try
to take a rash and careless step,
Or else they will not wait, but will
at once to foreign regions hie,
You knew their home was ocean...why
did you not with them go?"*

(*Sur Samundhi*, translated by Elsa Kazi)

In this couplet, Shah Latif advised the women that they should be alert lest their beloved ones may leave for the voyage suddenly. It depicts how helpless the women are where they are not even blessed with farewell bid by their very beloved ones for whom they (the women) are so worried. In the subsequent couplets, it is again reiterated to the women that if you want to see your beloved ones, you should settle by the side of the sea, else they would move silently into the oceans and will keep you on fire of separation.

It is clear that the female subalterns are not only emotionally erased from the process of life, but also from the economic spectrum as it is the male who would sail across the sea for trade and fishing purposes (cf. Spivak 1988: 24). It is evident in the poetry of Shah Latif that the female rests in the realm of nothingness in the market and economic activity as this couplet suggests: “[d]esolate are port and bazaar- for mariners have sailed away” (Sur Samundhi, translated by Elsa Kazi, n.d.). Desolate ports and bazaar suggest that there is no economic agency left to conduct business once the (male) mariners left it. It means that economic power rests with the male and thus the emotions/feelings of the powerless are considered less important than commercial activity. The helplessness of the female agency is also depicted in her inability to make her beloved stay for a while with her. In the following couplets, the female subaltern is lamenting her helplessness in her inability to change the behaviour of her beloved ones who are about to sail:

*“Lagen Os Paar Ki Dil Main Hain Phir Kuin?
 Na Jao Meray Banjaray Na Jao
 Kahin Gham Khatay Khatay Mar Na Jao
 Muhabbat Ki Qasam Hai Loat Awo”
 “Wo Meray Ruknay Se Kahan Rukengay
 Lipat Kar Un Se Lakh Aansoo Bahao
 Ye Aatish Zer-e-Paa Behri Musafar
 Meri Maa! Main Inhain Kab Tak Manao
 Wo Unke Badban Lehra Rahay Hain
 Safeenay Raqas Kartay Jaa Rahay Hain”
 (Ayaz 2016: 344)*

In the first pair of couplet, the female is shown as a creature full of love and obedience to her beloved and would die of grief due to separation, but the male has no such sentiments, at least at the realm of the expressions. She grieves and complains to her mother that her beloved is not even considering her prayers and would left her alone to the harshness of time and space. But despite blaming her beloved, the subaltern woman spoke through the following couplet of Shah Latif lamenting herself:

*“My love seems feeble, luckless fate;
 They pushed the boat off ere I knew;”*

(Sur Samundhi, translated by Elsa Kazi, n.d.)

It can be inferred from the above couplet that the female is represented as something saleable that the merchant has opted not to buy due some inherent defect in her. “*My love seems feeble*” can

be explained as if the merchant (her beloved) is a having a perfect gaze to look into the essence of things worth buying. The “*luckless fate*” is like dislocating the blame to fate instead of her beloved who has not bothered a second about her and has left her to the whims of loneliness.

Subaltern Beauty and Resistance in Disguise: An Analysis of Sur Kamod

In this Sur, a folk story of Noori, a Dalit fisherwoman and Jam Tamachi, a great ruler of Samma dynasty is portrayed. Noori is poor beautiful girl of the fishing community who is set to impress the King, Jam Tamachi through her beauty and innocence and thus brings down the gap between the ruling elites and Dalit subalterns (Sayed 1988: 301). Although, in the folk story, the fishing community is described as dirty smelling people living in rotten place, where it is impossible for the elites to go and mingle with them, but Noori is a charming lady and all her odd conditions would not restrain the king from asking for her hand (Sayed 1988: 301). The king marries her and exempts the fishing community from paying any taxes and tributes (Sayed 1988: 301).

At the surface, this seems the greatness of the king but there lies another interpretation to this folk event, i.e. the power of the subaltern beauty to change the mind of the king. The change of behaviour is related to the exercise of power (Hay 2002: 185; Foucault, 1982). Foucault (1982: 786-88) has moved the operationalisation of power a step further by claiming that it is ubiquitous and is not only governing human relations but also relations between things. This can lead us to divert from the traditional definitions of power and would allow us to look for power relationship between and among different social relations that have been normalised over history. Things would look quite normal and natural at the first instance because our subjectivities are shaped in accordance with the ideological needs of the dominant ruling groups (Althusser, 2014: 263-66), be they kings and bureaucrats or merchants and landlords or male. The very fact that the subalterns could not put an organised resistance to the dominant classes, the only “weapons of the weak”, to borrow from James Scott (1985), is the non-observable cultural resistance invoked in everyday life. In this everyday resistance, there is a “hidden transcript” which points towards the defiance put the weak in face of the strong.

In Sur Kamod, the “public transcript” may show the obedience of an eastern subaltern wife towards her male partner and the

greatness of the king in treating the poor well. The greatness of the king is advertised in the following couplets of Shah Latif's Sur Kamod, where he is depicted to having soft conversations with the stinking fishing community:

“Those who do feed on smelling fish,
and fish is all their property-
The king, the noble king, O see!
with them relationship has made”
“The basket full of smelling fish,
and all the loaded herring-trays-
Fishers, whose touch avoided is
and such unpleasantness conveys
The king strands in their thatch always
and gently holds converse with them!”

(Sur Kamod, translated by Elsa Kazi, n.d.)

In the above couplets, the king (male) is represented as a man of honour who is not bothered by his kingly position and is often visiting the dirty slums of the poor subalterns and has made a relationship with them. In the following couplets, again the king is portrayed as a hero who has raised the fisher-maid out of nothing to the position of human being:

“Credit of raising fisher-maid
Belongs to Tamachi,
He took her in his carriage, and
a human-being he
Made out of her,...in Keenjhar, see!
All say this is the truth”

(Sur Kamod, translated by Elsa Kazi, n.d.)

If we focus on the use of specific words used in these couplets like, “human-being”, “made out of her” and “truth”, it becomes clear that prior to the blessing of the king, the subaltern woman (Noori) was not a proper human-being and the truth is that these subaltern dalits were below the category of humanity. Achille Mbembe (1999: 184-86) argues the same about the lives of the postcolonial subalterns in Africa, where they are considered as “half-human, half-beast” and are not subjects but appearances that can be controlled and silenced at the whims of the dominant strata of society. The “truth” here is not the “native realm of truth”, to borrow from Mbembe (1999: 192), but the truth sanctioned by the dominant strata about the subalterns.

But the folk story also narrates that Noori was able to convince the king not to collect any taxes/tributes from the fishing community.

The “public transcript” will attribute it to the kind-heartedness of the king but the “hidden transcript” of this phenomenon might signify that the dialectical power-relationship tilted in favour of the subalterns. I deeper investigation of Shah Latif’s following couplets can be useful in this regard:

*“Tamachi! Ghaat Ke Malik Khudara!
Na Karna Apni Gandri Se Kinara
Na Lena Tum Koi Mehsul Hum Se
Ke Har Malah Hai Ghurbaat Ka Mara
Kahin Aankain Na Mujh Se Pheer Lena
Diya Hai Ger Muhabbat Ka Sahara”*

(Sur Kamod, Translated by Sheikh Ayaz, 2016: 355)

If we take the power-relation from a Foucauldian perspective, we would be able to decode the hidden meaning of a particular social relationship. Power relationship, according to Foucault (1982: 788) “is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others”. It is these actions of Noori whether invoked by her beauty or innocence that has modified the behaviour of Jam Tamachi that all the fishing community is exempted from taxation. Here beauty enables Noori to exercise certain powers over the king. Had it not been the power of beauty, how many before Noori had been able to get concessions for their people from the king?

The subaltern woman was also able to surpass in getting attention of the king as compared other queens of the elite class. As the folk story narrates that the king was trying to test the modesty of Noori and commanded that all his queens should be well dressed so that he might be able to give a royal ride to the lady of his choice. All except Noori dressed up in fine pieces of clothes and ornaments and the king saw Noori dressed in her ordinary dress, and choose her all over his queens (Ayaz 2016: 55).

*“Kahan Bughuz Wa Hasad Ab Raniyon Mai
Niyaz Aagayen Hai Noori Ki Jawani
Samma Sardar Us Per Shefta Hai
Wo Raja Hai Ye Us Ke Munn Ki Rani”*

(Sur Kamod, Translated by Sheikh Ayaz, 2016: 356)

In these couplets, Noori is able to exercise her subaltern powers over the king by not changing herself for the king, but made the king love her in her originality, i.e. she remained attached to her culture and has not changed it for the happiness of the king. This is another exercise of power by the subaltern woman in Foucauldian sense.

Elements of Resistance in Sur Marui

Marui is another subaltern character of the folk stories and in the poetry of Shah Latif. She belonged to the poor peasant family and is famous for her beauty. Her parents were sharecroppers (*Haris*) in partnership with another *Hari* (Ayaz 2016: 71). She was engaged to young man of her own community but the *Hari* partner of parents had a bad eye upon her. After being failed to seek her attention, the wicked *Hari* tried to get revenge by instigating the ruler of Omarkot to take Marui in his *Harem* (Ayaz 2016: 72). After being kidnapped by king Omar of Omarkot, Marui resisted every attempt of the king who tried hard to convince her on her new destination. She was constantly striving to go back to her parents and her fiancée even though she was imprisoned as a result. At the end, she succeeded in breaking the bondage and met the people she loved (Ayaz 2016: 72-73).

There are different interpretations of this story as depicted in the poetry of Shah Latif. In Sufi interpretations of Sur Marui as cited in Durr-e-Shahwar Sayed (1988: 93-94), king Omar is represented as *Nafs* while Marui is represented as a soul which is kept in bondage in her body (kept in fort Omarkot in the Sur) and is striving to reach the ultimate truth (Malir as symbolised in the Sur). Similarly, feminist interpretations are equating Marui with every common woman of Sindh who is taken as a hostage within the four walls and Omar as the patriarchy that has normalised the subordination and subjugation of women (Sayed, 1988: 95-96).

But there are many interpretations of this folk story versified by Shah Latif. If we look into the cause of Marui's kidnapping, it was her beauty that instigated her kidnapper as the legend tells us. And in order to resist her kidnapper, she decided not to look beautiful as evident in the following couplets:

*"Fair Marui does not wash her hair,
 She does not smile or eat,
 On Omar's justice relies she
 who robbed her freedom sweet;-
 "The havoc you have wrought, you'll meet
 at your arrival 'there'.
 Fair Marui does not wash her hair,
 clotted it is, ugly
 The nomad folks of desert land
 live in her memory-
 "Omar, parted from them, unfree
 I'll ne'er in forts reside. ""*

(Sur Marui, translated by Elsa Kazi, n.d.)

In these couplets, Marui is described as not washing her body and eating food and is wearing shabby clothes that would rip her off her charm so that Omar (her kidnapper) might not find the gem he was looking for and set her free. The ordinary forms of resistance as recognised in dominant discourses if adopted by Marui would not have worked in front of the powerful ruler of Omarkot, so she improvised the “weapons of the weak” by deciding not to look beautiful by not washing her body, not having sufficient diet and wearing colourful clothes.

The subalterns have a space where they exercise the subjectivity freely and Omar’s mansion was the space of the elites where the subaltern subjectivity can only be silenced and possessed. Marui is doubly subalternised in Spivakian (1988) sense, one tormented by the Omar and the other the questioning of her character by her own people. As Marui laments in the following couplets:

*“Omar, for me your mansions grand
a double torture are;
Here you torment me...there, so far
loved-ones accuse me too.”*

(Sur Marui, translated by Elsa Kazi, n.d.)

It is clear from the above couplets that women are doubly subalternised in many ways. In this specific case, the elite king has forcefully tried to possess the subaltern women for lust and her subaltern folks have accused her of having bad-character despite the fact that she was abducted by force.

It is not about wealth and provision of easements that would silence the subaltern under investigation. What this subaltern (Marui) has stood for is the reclaiming of her agency, where she could decide what to do and where to go and with whom to live? Since she is not ready to live with Omar and is lasting to return back to her beloved ones, she utters her will in the following couplets:

*“Were I to breathe my last, looking
to my home longingly-
My body don't imprison here
in bondage and unfree-
A stranger from her love away
not bury separately;
The cool earth of the desert let
the dead one's cover be;
When last breath comes, O carry me*

to Malir, I implore.”

(Sur Marui, translated by Elsa Kazi, n.d.)

In this couplets, she is resisting the tyrant even when she is dead by saying that my dead body should not be buried in the land of the tyrant and should be carried out to the place where once I felt safe, free and happy. It is also evident from these couplets that resistance and necropolitics are at work here. Necropolitics, according to Mbembe (2003: 11) assumes “that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die”. Marui’s body has been kept in prison and it is very likely that she might have been killed at the hands of the tyrant but she intends to resist necropolitics even through her dead body. The subaltern woman is living in the “state of exception” and fomenting her is a normative act (cf. Mbembe 2003: 17), but putting a resistance against this “state of exception” is indeed heroic.

This resistance ultimately led to the freedom of Marui which means that her powers have shaped the actions of others, i.e. Omar has set her free. But she is again facing subalternity as her fiancée is having reservations about her character now, for which the subaltern has no evidence to prove her modesty until Omar himself testifies the modesty of Marui (Ayaz, 2016: 74). In short there are unending forms of subalternity and resistance in this Sur.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Shah Latif’s poetry provides a vivid picture of an unequal society divided into the elites and the subalterns. It also throws light on the patriarchy in which the women’s subalternity is given as a norm. The subaltern women are haunted by the whims of patriarchy and the elite rule and their voices are often silenced. In Sur Samundhi, for example, the women are deprived of any role in the economic activity and are being marginalised and unattended emotionally, i.e. they are economically and emotionally suppressed and their voices are not heard by their beloved male.

But there are certain instances in the poetry of Shah Latif where the subaltern women have been able to shape the course of history through their resistance and resilience to stick to their originality and have gained concessions for themselves and their community from the powerful elites. In Sur Kamod, Noori is able to change the centuries’ long practice of taxation of the fishing community using her beauty and modesty as a “weapon of the weak”. Noori is

even able to gain high place among the queens of Jam Tamachi while not forgetting her original self.

In Sur Marui, a subaltern beauty, Marui, is kidnapped by a tyrant king Omar because of her beauty and she has decided not to be beautiful anymore by not washing her body, eating food and wearing clean clothes. It is a resistance in disguise which she thought would change the mind of Omar regarding her beauty and would eventually set her free. Her resistance against necropolitics reached the extreme when she decided to resist the tyrant through her dead body and willed that she should be buried in her native town among her people.

In all these three Surs, Shah Latif has portrayed the simple annals of the poor, the division of society on the basis of wealth, power and gender and the subaltern women's resistance against the elites or the forceful silence and possession of female subaltern bodies. Although, there are different interpretations of Shah Latif's poetry but this specific study grounded in subaltern studies perspective has made a case for the depiction of female subalternity and resistance in his poetry.

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